The Last Watch

by Lewis Brindley

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Chapter 1

Stormwind, Eastern Kingdoms

Although the warm air held the sticky warmth of midsummer, rain fell heavily outside the city gates of Stormwind, drumming on the polished armor of the guardsmen like a thousand tiny hammer blows. The soldiers on the wall nervously flexed their fingers around sword hilts as they squinted through the rain. They could still make out the black-clad figure as he continued his steady stride towards the gates.

Scouts had observed the stranger for a while now, and the city gates had been swung shut as a precaution. By size and shape, it was a man in blackened full-plate armor - but there was something amiss. He appeared to carry a rectangular shield, so large and thick that it could have been cannibalized from a siege engine. Such a weight would have unbalanced even King Varian – but the stranger walked as casually as if he were naked.

Lieutenant Maris, Commander of the Guard, barked commands at the men on the wall, then climbed onto her horse and spurred out from the gates. She pulled up twenty yards from the stranger, lowered her rain-slickened visor and drew her sword with a thin ringing sound.

“Stop,” she commanded. “Or I’ll stop you.”

The man ignored her, the rainwater splashing and rolling off his dark armor, turning slowly crimson and staining his footprints blood-red behind him.

Maris grinned widely, as though she had been hoping that the stranger would disobey her. She leapt down from the horse, and was suddenly flanked by four other guardsmen, each pointing blades and notched arrows at the man.

If he were aware of the threat, he showed no sign – continuing his steady pace. Then, just as Maris opened her mouth to signal the attack, the man dropped to one knee in a bow. He raised a stained silk tabard in one blackened gauntlet.

Maris failed to stifle a gasp as she recognized the symbol on the tabard – a large blue key. The color had nearly faded now, and was almost as grey as the miserable sky above them. But the symbol was unmistakable, and she knew what it meant.

“By the light, what news?” She shouted, running to the man and grabbing at his shoulders. Brown-black flakes came away on her wet fingers, and she was dimly aware that the black coating was charred blood.

“What news?” she pressed again. “What news of Gilneas?”

The stranger lifted his head and the woman flinched back in sudden horror. His eyes burned brightly with the terrible blue flames of the Lich King's power.

"Gilneas is lost," said the death knight, in a voice that shook her to her bones.

Chapter 2

3 weeks earlier,

Gilneas Peninsula, Eastern Kingdoms

The Sparkling City of Gilneas rested on the tip of a mountainous peninsula that stretched into the sea – a jewel held aloft on a titan's finger. A fall from the glittering city walls was a long one, as many would-be invaders had found before being torn apart on the sharp-edged rocks below.

A pair of enormous steel gates on the north-east side were the only entrance to the city, and had once opened onto fertile highlands that gently sloped

towards the forest of Silverpine on the mainland of the Eastern Kingdoms. But for almost ten years, the gates had been magically sealed, and the once verdant lands of Gilneas had turned a bruised purple-brown, blighted by tendrils of necromancy and plague.

An army of undead pushed at the line of soldiers on the north-east wall, a swarm of rotting flesh and bone that was barely held back by a thin string of steel. The soldiers, breathing heavily and sodden with the gore of battle, were a barrier of whirling death that flashed in the summer sunlight, slicing and shredding through the hellish army that assaulted them.

At first, the reanimated horrors had been recognizable – milky-eyed Gilnean farmers tearing out their fingernails to scale the city walls with frenzied unholy strength. Those early attacks were easy to repel, but the tide of undead rolled in unceasing waves. Week by week, putrid remains piled against the walls, and red-robed necromancers would spray black and green lightning from their bony hands – raising new abominations to send back into the fray. Over ten years of siege, the stinking pile of dead had compacted into a ramp as high as the city walls – and the undead came in greater numbers than ever before.

A cry went up from the soldiers on the wall as two enormous flesh giants began climbing the slope. The creatures were made from sewn-together parts of fallen giants – legendary creatures that none of the men on the wall had seen alive. One giant carried an ancient steel-framed cart and the other wore a strange patchwork of cannibalized human breastplates. Some of the patches still bore the ruined banners of long-dead human kingdoms, reminding the men on the wall of their fate if they failed to repel the attack.

The thirty men at the wall reacted with practiced grace, sweeping aside lesser undead with their large shields and stepping back to isolate the giants.

But one swordsman hadn't moved quickly enough, allowing the first giant to surge forward and bring down the steel and oak weapon with incredible speed. The man reacted at the last second, lifting his shield over his head and catching the cart with a terrible crack that threw up a cloud of splintered wood and metal.

As the dust settled, the other guardsman lowered their arms and were surprised to see that the soldier was still alive,

forced onto one knee with the flagstone below him cracked by the blow. The giant blinked his single red eye in confusion, then the man pushed upwards, hard.

The cart hit the giant's face with a crunching sound, causing it to stagger wildly, crushing ghouls and skeletons under metal feet. But the soldier was not finished and he leapt forwards, swinging his blade through the giant's knee with surgical precision. Releasing a terrible scream, the monster fell like a tree – falling backwards and colliding with the other giant.

The noise of battle lulled for a moment as the two giants half-slipped and half-fell from the cliff edge, taking a host of minions with them to the distant rocks below.

A tall, broad-shouldered guardsman let out a long sigh.

“Damn Zerzera,” he said, watching the messy descent of the giants as they bounced off the rocks. “Save some for the rest of us.”

A few of the other guardsmen began to laugh at this, but they were quickly silenced by a gruff shout from the city below.

“Zerzera Lanus, down here now!” shouted the voice, which echoed off the city wall with the full strength of the man who had ruled Gilneas for nearly fifty years.

“You’re in for it now,” said the tall guardsman.

“You too, Laslo Antares,” shouted the voice from below.

The big man swore and it was Zerzera’s turn to laugh.

The two men tramped down the stone stairs that ran down from the top of the ramparts into the city, the noise of the

battle resuming behind them as the undead began another assault.

Once down from the battlements, Zerzera felt a weight lift from his shoulders. The city walls were unique – designed and built centuries ago by long-dead mages from faraway Dalaran. The silver-blue stones were enchanted to make the air above them heavy, giving it the appearance of a heat haze. Arrows or siege weapons fired over the wall spun wildly and lost their power. Gryphons and gargoyles also couldn't make it across the walls, finding their wings suddenly heavy, as if caked with mud.

Of course, the soldiers defending the wall also felt the extra weight – so a special army of the strongest warriors had been formed to protect the wall. These soldiers were the last line of defense: The Last Watch.

The people of Gilneas were no strangers to wall building, but it was a trait that had led to their current predicament. Ten years ago, the King of Gilneas, Lord Greymane, had ordered the construction of a wall at the base of the peninsula to separate Gilneas from the mainland like a tourniquet. But instead of protecting the people of Gilneas, it had trapped them.

The King waited for Zerzera and Laslo at the bottom of the stairs, his visor raised and bearded face glowing beetroot-red in a combination of sunburn and barely concealed rage. He wore no crown or jewelry, but was dressed like the other soldiers: in full glittering plate armor and a silken tabard emblazoned with a blue key.

Lord Genn Greymane was by far the oldest member of The Last Watch, but still one of the most formidable. Despite being well past his seventieth year, his voice, strength and power had not noticeably diminished, and his fierce bear-like combat style was legendary. Although he was not as quick as some of

the younger watchmen, he still put in the standard eight hours of front-line combat every day.

“Captain Lanus,” said Lord Greymane, addressing Zerzera in a wavering voice that barely concealed the fury evident on his face. “Try not to get yourself killed. The last thing we need is another mindless zombie coming back at us, although I don’t know how any of us would tell the difference with you.”

“I’m-” Zerzera began, but Greymane cut him off, releasing his fury like a burst blood vessel.

“Silence! I don’t give a whore’s wart about your life, Lanus! One less watchman means more work for us – and that’s five minutes less that I spend in bed with your wife every night.”

“Lord, I’m not marri-”

“Silence!” exploded Greymane again, covering Zerzera with a thin film of spittle. “Try anything – *anything* -like that again, and I’ll throw you over the walls myself,” he raged.

Zerzera stood in silence as Greymane breathed heavily and turned towards Laslo.

“Useless! And I know you’re a fat idiot Antares, but if you can’t keep up with this reckless fool, then we can assign you to someone else. Perhaps Captain Mott on the night shift. I hear her last partner fell off the wall. An *accident*.”

With his last words, Greymane rolled his eyes and spat on the floor. Laslo swallowed audibly, expecting another few but Greymane appeared to have run out of steam. He gave the two watchmen a final look of contempt.

“Get out of my sight,” said Greymane. “You two are back on duty in twelve hours.”

Chapter 3

As Zerzera and Laslo trudged back into the city, the noise and adrenaline of the fight gradually faded. They walked their usual path through the city center, the late afternoon sun baking the orange flagstones around the great fountains.

A few people were visible, busily carrying boxes loaded with tools, supplies or weapons. Every square inch of green land in the city had been converted to farmland, and even Zerzera had a small collection of vegetable plants that he tended on his balcony during his short breaks from the wall.

He stopped at a large fountain, pulled off his helm and leaned over to examine his reflection in the clear sparkling water. His sweat-soaked brown hair hung lankly down over sunken brown eyes and grey cheeks. Blood had found its way through his visor and was smeared over his nose and cheeks, like a troll tattoo.

“Looking good,” said Laslo.

Zerzera turned. His friend had removed his plate boots and was standing in a nearby fountain, his filthy armor slowly staining the swirling water that lapped around his knees. The day’s battle had turned them into ghouls – covered from

helm to toe with sticky red and green goo.

The problem was the skeletons, Zerzera thought. Venom, vomit, blood, guts and brains were washed away easily, but smashed bones threw up clouds of choking dust. Like flour and water, the combination made a sticky paste that stuck to armor like glue.

“Well, my wife will be delighted I’m home early,” Laslo said, with a wry smile. “Pasco’s later?”

Zerzera nodded and Laslo walked away, leaving wet footprints that soon dried on the hot flagstones.

In a quick movement, Zerzera unhooked his shield and let it fall into the fountain. The rest of his armor followed and soon he was only wearing the brown wax-covered leathers that allowed the intricately molded plates to move smoothly across one another, leaving no gaps where an opponent could slide his blade through.

Then he began the routine of cleaning his armor. The rest of the world knew Gilneas for its wonderful fountains, Zerzera thought, but the true reason for its success was the forges.

Zerzera knew the legends – how when Gilneas was young, men had flocked to the mountain peninsula chasing gold, silver and gemstones. And how they had dug too deep in their furious greed, hitting reservoirs of icy water and a choking, foul-smelling gas. But it was not the end for Gilneas – and enterprising young engineers built pipes to channel the water and gas away from the riches. The result was a unique kingdom; a wealthy city balanced precariously on the edge of a mountain.

Those first pipes eventually became a great network; copper rods were sunk into the ground and thick piping spread gas through the city, feeding tall lanterns that were lit in the evenings to bathe the city in a warm light.

During the day, the gas was diverted instead to great forges – where it would produce such enormous heat that Gilnean smiths could experiment with metals and ores that were previously impossible to melt together. Before long, Gilnean plate was famed for its lightweight strength and was demanded across the world.

Zerzera finished cleaning his armor and watched as a nearby soldier started her routine of doing the same. After a minute, he left his armor pieces on the edge of the fountain to dry and walked barefoot through the city along one of the large canals. A shabby boat-like building that bobbed and tilted on the canal grew closer as he walked. Above the door was a wildly-swinging sign that read "*Pasco's Tavern*".

The sun had started to dip below the horizon as he pushed inside. The busy crowd finally drowned out the noise from the battle at the wall, and Zerzera headed for the long wooden bar.

“Good evening son,” said the barman, in a rounded accent that marked him as a Kul’Tiran. “What’ll it be?”

Zerzera had heard this question from Hector a thousand times, but his answer was always the same.

“I’ll have whatever he’s having,” he replied, pointing a rust-stained thumb towards the skeleton sitting at the end of the bar. The joke was nearly ten years old, but the barman still laughed, his sagging cheeks wobbling as he bent to withdraw an ancient-looking bottle from under the bar.

“You’re going to like this, boy,” he said, holding the bottle up to the sunset and blowing a cloud of dust from the faded label. Through the dancing particles in the air, Zerzera could make out a pinkish liquid in the bottle and sighed.

“Grakkarond’s teeth, not more of that damned beetroot wine you cooked up last year,” said Zerzera, his nose wrinkling with the memory. “My piss was bright red for a week - I thought I’d caught the damned plague!”

Hector laughed properly this time, wheezing slightly in his mirth. “No, no, it’s your lucky day,” he managed. “Well, Lord Greymane’s lucky day. It’s his birthday – see – and he’s cracked open a few crates from what’s left in the palace cellars.”

Zerzera raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Really? What is it?”

“It’s ten silver, that’s what,” said Hector with a grin.

“You sneaky bastard,” said Zerzera, throwing a few coins onto the countertop, then snatching up the bottle and plunging back into the noisy crowd.

He spotted Laslo quickly – the big man was sitting at their usual table in the back, scratching at his thick beard with a ragged deck of cards. He turned as Zerzera approached, then waved – at the same time dislodging one of the cards he was holding. The big man moved with startling speed, but the card had slipped through the floorboards before Laslo could grab it. He swore as it was snatched up and carried away by the fast-flowing water underneath.

Pasco's had been built by a shrewd Kul'Tiran whose real name was lost in the mists of time, but was known to every Gilnean as the lonely skeleton sitting at the bar. Some said that Pasco had been a sailor all his life and felt at home on the roiling water, but Zerzera had heard it differently. Pasco, or whatever his real name was, couldn't afford to rent anywhere in Gilneas, so decided to float a wooden bar across one of the fast-moving canals. After a couple of failed designs that were whisked off the cliffs by the treacherous current, Pasco completed the current design – a creaking monstrosity that half-straddled and half-floated on the canal.

But that was a long time ago. Buildings had risen and fallen in Gilneas and *Pasco's* was now one of the oldest buildings in the city. Since the siege began, ten years ago, people had started to joke that the day *Pasco's* fell into the ocean would be the day that the walls of Gilneas were finally broken.

Zerzera watched Laslo's card float down the canal and disappear out of sight as it dropped over the edge. "Which one was that?" he said.

"Three of portals," said Laslo. "I think."

"Nothing too important then."

Laslo pouted, then reached over to grab the bottle from Zerzera's hands and squint at the label. Although there was a full moon, it was getting dark in the bar, and Zerzera wondered why the city's gas lanterns had not been turned on.

"What's this stuff?" he said.

"Bloody beetroot wine," replied Zerzera, elbowing round to the other side of the table. "Hector covered it with dust and sold me some crap about Greymane's birthday. You?"

Laslo gestured at the two thick metal mugs on the table. “Surprisingly nice pint of Rumsey,” he said with a smile. “One for you too – although I’m tempted to keep it for myself since you’ve come up short again.”

Zerzera grinned and reached for the frothy pot in front of him. Laslo was right – it was delicious. Hector enforced Lord Greymane's "one drink" rule well enough, but he was usually more generous than most barkeeps in the town. Even so, the ten-year siege had not been kind to the city's supply of alcohol. Fresh sparkling water was plentiful of course – bubbling up from the great fountains and guided out of the city in the three great canals – but it did little to wash away the day's mental scars.

Men coming down from the wall were grateful for anything that Hector could provide, but Zerzera thought the barman was sometimes enjoyed it too much. Ordering at Pasco's was random chance – you were just as likely to get a tankard of fine ale as a smoking glass of bitter green liquid that tasted like rancid spinach.

“He’s got a streak of goblin blood in him, I tell you,” nodded Laslo, and began telling the story of when Hector made him carry some heavy wooden casks down to the underground chamber that was also a makeshift brewery. Zerzera had heard the story before, but it was a good one – and it certainly beat talking about what they had been doing for the past eight hours. Today, Laslo made Hector’s brewery sound like a lost goblin workshop, with mysterious wooden levers and handles covering the walls and the floor piled high with bubbling stills and strange vats of rainbow fluids.

Zerzera put the metal mug down with a thump and released a deep, satisfied breath. As he did so, he noticed that they were not alone at the small table – a woman and a troll had seated themselves opposite and were watching him carefully.

Zerzera recognized the woman, but he was not sure if she had shared his bed. No, he decided – she was attractive enough for him to have remembered. He also recognized the troll, but it was difficult not to. In a city of less than a thousand people, an orange-skinned troll stood out – particularly since he was nearly seven feet tall and sporting two bronzed tusks that jutted from his jaws like daggers.

“Are these the ones?” the woman whispered to the troll. The troll didn’t answer, instead keeping his eyes fixed on Zerzera.

“Evening.” said Laslo, banging his ragged deck of cards on the table. “Fancy a game? Maybe tell your future?”

Laslo had borrowed the opening line from Zerzera, who had used it with great success in the past. Many times, he had correctly predicted that the woman in question would wake up in his bed the following morning. This time, however, the woman snapped her head around to scowl at Laslo.

“Not with those, oaf,” she spat. “Half of them are missing, and several are bar mats that you’ve drawn numbers on.”

Huge muscles tensed under Laslo's shirt, and he stuck out his bottom lip in a mocking sad face. "I don't need cards to tell the future. I see very clearly that you'll soon be having a nice long swim in the ocean."

The woman looked in the direction that Laslo had indicated, then gripped the wooden handrail suddenly. The table was one of the backmost in *Pasco's*, overlooking the canal so that if the place did come loose, there was no way out before it plummeted over the edge.

Zerzera clapped Laslo on the shoulder and laughed. He had seen his friend dangle people off the back of *Pasco's* for much less. "A good deck of cards is hard to find these days, friend," said Zerzera, soothingly. "What do you want?"

The woman looked at the troll, and when he still didn't respond, she elbowed him in the ribs. The troll blinked, seeming to wake from a trance, then withdrew several rounded bones from a cloth pouch. Zerzera recognized them as knucklebones – although they were far bigger and darker than the sheep's bones he had played with as a child. Dragon bones maybe?

Laslo gave a grunt, unimpressed. “There’s no skill in – “

The troll made a hissing noise that silenced Laslo and then threw the bones across the table. They scattered and twisted as their various rounded and pointed edges made them bounce wildly. The bones skidded to a halt around the table, but in the dim light, a smaller bone darted off the edge. Laslo jerked to catch it, but it had already slipped through the floorboards.

Zerzera watched Laslo roll his eyes, but the troll and woman hadn't noticed. They were instead transfixed by the bones on the table. While most were still the dull black color, two of the bones were burning from inside with a bright red glow. Above the glowing bones floated two wavering symbols, a yawning skull and a flickering fire.

The troll scooped the pale bones back into his bag, then pushed the two lit bones into the woman's hand, where they darkened again. She threw them onto the table, and they lit up in the same way: red skull, red fire.

“We die and are forgotten,” she said, her pounding heartbeat obvious in her unsteady voice. The troll ignored her and pushed the bones towards Zerzera.

“Roll,” the woman instructed.

“Why?”

“Just roll.”

“Will you tell me your name if I roll?”

The woman frowned at him, then her face softened. “Camisade.” she said.

“Roll.”

Zerzera rolled the bones, which felt warm and heavy in his hands. They twisted for a moment in mid-air, as if pulled on strings, before falling to the table. One of the runes had changed color and now glowed with an eerie blue light. Zerzera recognized that color – he had seen in the eyes of countless undead before cutting them down. The glowing symbols had changed too – the blue rune showed the image of a sword. The red rune showed the image of a shield. The troll frowned, then gathered the bones back together and pushed them towards Laslo.

Laslo threw the bones heavily on the table. They bounced and this time, only one of the runes glowed blue with the symbol of the skull. The other was dim and ordinary.

The troll hissed again.

“No green runes, but it will have to do, right?” said the woman. She reached into an inside pocket and withdrew a large rolled up parchment, creased and worn at the edges. After a moment of hesitation, she held it out towards Zerzera.

“Guard this with your life. It’s enchanted with directions that will help you find the Gilnean fleet. We need you to take it to someone that can help – one of the kingdoms, if there are any left.”

Zerzera absorbed this in silence, and Camisade continued in a hushed tone.

“We aren’t hopeful about Lordaeron or Dalaran, and we know Kul’Tiras is gone, but there’s a good chance that Stormwind or the dwarves of Ironforge still survive. If not, the goblins at the Undermine might be able to help you.”

Zerzera knew what had happened – everyone did, but it seemed so long time ago. Ten years had passed since the undead ripped through Gilneas. At that time, the great Kul'Tiran fleet had arrived at the lowland harbor, loaded with refugees and stories of how their island home had been lost. Greymane made a decision: the remaining Gilnean brigades and non-essential civilians would evacuate. With a reduced population, the city could last indefinitely – so long as the walls held. Tens of thousands had boarded the boats, leaving only The Last Watch and a mixture of aging civilians to guard the city.

“Why me?” said Zerzera.

“Because according to the runes, you might not die tomorrow.”

“Might not?”

“Well,” said Camisade, “Red means ending, but skulls really do mean death. You’re the first one in the city we’ve found that didn’t roll a skull.”

Zerzera glanced at Laslo, who puffed out his cheeks and shrugged.

“So what do the sword and shield mean?”

“There are many meanings,” said the woman, crossing her arms across her chest. “Some good, some bad. The shield can be sacrifice or cowardice. The sword can be bravery or recklessness.”

“But you’re sure the skull is death right?” said Laslo.

Camisade nodded.

“Excellent,” said Laslo sarcastically. “Well, I don’t have any plans to die tomorrow, but I’d like another drink.”

The big man reached into his pocket and threw a silver coin to the troll, who caught it. “Go and get me one,” he said, then reached for the beetroot wine and took a long swig.

“Damn it Zerzera, this isn’t beetroot wine,” said Laslo. “It’s bloody strawberry liqueur!”

Chapter 4

Zerzera was woken by the sound of a bell. The rhythm was unsteady at first, as if it had not been rung in a long time, but it quickly picked up speed and volume. As he sat up, he noticed that an arm was draped over his bare chest. It was not a particularly attractive arm, the sun-darkened skin dotted with tattoos and scar tissue.

He turned his head to the side, so his mouth was only an inch from hers. Her face was calm, the first time he had seen it like that, and it made his heart jump in his chest. He felt her sleepy breathing on his lips and could smell her sweat mixed with a lingering strawberry flavor. A feeling of tranquility had settled over him. He wished that the moment could last forever.

Then Zerzera realized what the bells meant – the undead had broken through the walls. As if sensing his quickened heartbeat, Camisade opened her eyes. Then the door burst open and Laslo charged in, his full plate armor and massive shield barely fitting in the doorframe. His expression didn't change as he observed the naked pair.

“Hurry up,” he said, and then pointed at Camisade. “Get to the keep,” he told her, indicating the small, rounded tower that served as Greymane’s palace. The keep was a last refuge for the civilians and would serve as a temporary defense if the enemy broke into the city. However, Zerzera knew that the aged and wounded men that defended it would not hold out for long.

“I’ll be at the fountains,” said Laslo, and vanished out the door. Zerzera leapt from the bed and began pulling on underclothes and leathers. He saw that Camisade was also dressing, and tore his eyes from her body to run for the door.

“Protect the scroll,” said Camisade, stopping Zerzera with his hand on the frame. “It is more important than us. Gilneas will not live on without that scroll.”

Zerzera nodded, then darted downstairs and out into the street. As he ran to the fountain where his armor lay, he quickly spread wax over the leathers that covered his wrists, knees, shoulders and chest. It was usually a long process to ensure that each carefully-engineered plate interlocked correctly, but there was no time.

Laslo came running up as Zerzera finished bolting on his shield, and they jogged together to the wall. Zerzera had not seen the city this busy in ten years, and men and women rushed about carrying weapons, armor and sheaves of arrows.

Through the rush, Zerzera saw Lord Greymane hurry past with Hector – the barman carrying a thick-bladed meat cleaver in his hand. As Zerzera watched, the pair pulled open two large metal doors that were mounted in the ground and disappeared under the fountains.

Zerzera could see the gravity of the situation from a distance. The inside of the city walls were streaming wet with blood, which was not unusual, except that the blood was bright red. It was fresh human blood, rather than the dark red-purple that splattered from undead arteries.

On top of the walls left and right, Zerzera could see watchmen struggling to hold back clawed horrors, but it was a losing battle. The few remaining defenders shoved with shields, throwing the creatures off the cliffs or into the city, where they were cut to pieces by old men or boys wielding kitchen knives and scythes.

He heard Laslo gasp at his side. A tall man was standing in the middle of the wall, looking over the city, a huge glowing blue sword hanging at his side. The figure was swathed in elaborate blue-black plate, heavily embellished with runes and symbols. As Zerzera watched, the man pulled off his helm, releasing long white hair that fell to his shoulders. A gust of wind blew the hair from his face, revealing striking features – a large nose and high cheekbones, grey-pale skin, and eyes that burned from within, that same accursed blue that Zerzera saw every night in his dreams.

Around the white-haired man's feet were crumpled corpses, their bright armor slick with blood. Zerzera recognized each of the dead and tightness gripped his chest – a growing feeling of fury mixed with fear.

As they joined the thirty or forty other watchmen defending the hastily constructed barricade underneath the walls, the undead hordes suddenly drew back, accompanied by a silence that quickly settled over the troops. It was the first time the watchmen had seen the commander of the enemy that had assaulted them in ten years – and he had already broken through the wall,

something that had never been achieved in the history of Gilneas.

A crisp rasping voice rang out from the Gilnean lines, and Zerzera turned to see Lord Greymane standing in front of the troops, his silver armor with the symbol of the blue key glimmering brightly in the morning sun.

“I am Genn Greymane, Lord of Gilneas.”

The blue figure did not reply, so Greymane spoke again, his voice commanding and confident.

“For ten years you have tried. You will never take the jewel of - “

The man with the blue sword suddenly laughed, a long chilling laugh that reverberated across the walls and into the city, cutting off Greymane's words. When he had finished, he spoke in a slow voice that was tainted with madness, a voice that made the minds of the soldiers itch.

"I don't want your pathetic city."

There was silence for a moment. Zerzera wondered whether Greymane would order the watchmen to retake the wall. After all, the men who had been up there had probably been exhausted. A hard push with fresh men might be successful.

“I met you once, Genn Greymane,” said the white-haired figure. “I doubt if you remember. It was the day you told my father of the wall you were building – the wall that bears your name.”

Greymane’s ancient brow wrinkled. “Prince Arthas?”

“Ahh,” the man breathed slowly. “So you do remember. Do you also recall telling us how your people would hide like cowards and cockroaches, leaving us to face the forces of darkness alone?”

“So you want revenge, runt?” said Greymane. “You are as worthless as your father – a fool who is unable to see when he should back down.”

“Not revenge,” said Arthas, before sweeping his arm across the city in front of him. “I came here once. My father told me you were strong – a powerful ally, if only you cared for anyone but yourselves. I’m glad that I don’t have to convince you. I now possess the means to take your strength for myself.”

Greymane hesitated before replying. “What do you want?”

“You still do not know? Why do you think the siege has lasted ten years, old coward?” said Arthas, although he did not wait for an answer. “I could have taken Gilneas on the first day, had I wanted.”

Greymane didn't reply.

"It was difficult to judge at first," Arthas went on, "But I made it into a fine art. Planning attacks that were strong enough to challenge your men, but keep them scared and sharp. Ensuring that there is always pressure, always a constant threat – strong enough to weed out the weak, the lazy and the unlucky."

Greymane still didn't reply, his teeth were gritted in anger but some of the color had drained from his face. For the first time, Zerzera thought that he looked old.

Arthas raised his sword in a slow arc to point at the sky. It seemed to be made

from blue glass, and a roiling smoke began to spin outwards from the blade, flickering and flashing. Zerzera's mind spun as memories of near-death cascaded through his mind: a ghoul claw slitting open his eyelid and cheek, Laslo's hand catching him as he fell from the walls, an enormous flesh giant bearing down on him.

The crumpled bodies around Arthas began to twitch and shake, then slowly rise from the ground, jerking like puppets. Cracking noises could be heard as broken bones snapped back into place behind metal plates and torn skin sealed shut.

Zerzera looked in horror at the blood-soaked soldiers with their glowing blue eyes.

“Do you know the true value of a soldier in The Last Watch, old coward?” said Arthas, his voice slow and mocking. “Do you really? These soldiers are the finest weapons on Azeroth. Is there any army in the world with training, skill or equipment that matches these men and women?”

Greymane’s face was pale.

“Yes, my death knights are mighty: ever-loyal legions of the finest men and women to grace the battlefields of Azeroth,” Arthas continued. “But true strength is scarce. Most people are unremarkable in life – which makes them unremarkable in death. Even an eternity of training cannot make them strong. You cannot make fine blades with cheap metal.”

He waved his hands over the newly risen death knights, his voice rising in intensity. “You should be proud, Genn Greymane. You and your men will form a new army, the most powerful that Azeroth has ever seen. The Last Watch will be an unstoppable force to spearhead my conquest of this world and others!”

Arthas was shouting now, his echoing voice filled with wild adrenaline. “There will be no more hiding behind your walls! You will drive what remains of humanity to extinction! You will claim this world and the next for the Lich King!”

And with that, a wave of undead horrors swarmed into the city and Arthas leapt into the fray, a lunatic grin on his lips.

Chapter 5

Without the dampening field of the wall, Zerzera was faster than usual and his sword blurred and flickered through the air. But fighting his fellow watchmen was hard – they deftly blocked and dodged, then struck back with startling speed.

Laslo moved in perfect unison a step behind Zerzera, elegantly spinning his long hammer-tipped pike like a butterfly catcher with a net. An undead watchman with glowing blue eyes lunged at Zerzera and he paused for an instant, recognizing the soldier. It was Captain Mott from the night shift, a feisty woman who had dragged him to her bed on several warm afternoons. The pause nearly cost him his life, and he barely managed to knock her wild blow aside, her sword raising sparks as it scraped down his arm.

Laslo brought the hammer down hard with a clanging blow that knocked Mott to the ground, momentarily stunning her. Zerzera, his mind re-focused, darted forward with a lightning stab that went sliced through the grated visor and into her skull.

As she slumped to the ground Zerzera had a moment to wonder whether she would be revived again. Would she continue to die, over and over in service for the rest of eternity? Would he and Laslo share the same fate if they failed to repel this attack?

The onslaught resumed as a patchworked pink and green abomination bore down at Zerzera, swinging a large metal axe. He dodged easily and Laslo pinned the giant with the sharp end of his hammer, allowing Zerzera to cut through crucial joints and muscles with the skill of a butcher. He spared a glance to his right, to see Greymane battling with Arthas. The white-haired prince was raining blows on Greymane, who blocked and dodged with the skill of a man fifty years younger.

But watchmen were falling all around - Zerzera could see - pierced through weak points in their armor by sharpened metal or bone. Where they fell, tendrils of black and green smoke encircled them, and they rose again, surging back into the fray with rejuvenated vigor to assault their friends and lovers.

Zerzera could see that the barricade was not going to hold and a feeling of dread washed over him.

“Lanus! Over here!”

It was Greymane's voice, and Zerzera backed out of the lines to see the Lord of Gilneas panting heavily, bent over and holding his knees. Arthas had fallen back behind the lines of undead, a dent clearly visible in his helm.

"I only gave him a gentle tap!" shouted Greymane over the noise of the battle. "You need to go and find Hector! Tell him to be ready! I'll finish off this idiot child."

Zerzera paused, but Laslo pushed him from behind.

"Go, before you give the old man anything else to worry about."

Zerzera nodded at his friend and ran towards the city. It only took a couple of minutes to reach Pasco's. The canal was running much lower than usual, Zerzera thought, which made the tavern strangely twisted as it floated on the water. Occasionally, when the water was very high, *Pasco's* would flood and the patrons waded in ankle-deep water. Zerzera smiled. These were the times when Hector would offer his "wet footers" – half price drinks, partly to tryout some of his latest concoctions, but partly as a bid to weigh the tavern down to prevent it from taking flight down the canal.

Hector was searching through cupboards beneath the bar when Zerzera entered, and he sighed with relief when he recognized his friend.

“Lord Greymane sent me,” Zerzera said quickly. “You have to be ready. What do you have planned?”

“Ah-ha!” said Hector, lifting a large key from under the bar, made from an ancient looking blue metal. It bore a striking similarity to the key that was the symbol of The Last Watch. “I knew it was here somewhere! Quick, we must-”

Hector's words were cut short by a blade that sprouted from his chest, soon joined by blood that soaked into his jerkin and shirt. The blade withdrew and Hector fell to the ground, revealing the skeleton of Pasco behind him, brandishing a bloodied carving knife. The skeleton's eye sockets burned with wild blue fire, and it leapt towards Zerzera, but he reacted quickly, kicking the skeleton in the ribs to send him skidding backwards to crash through tables and chairs.

Zerzera tapped the unmoving skeleton with his foot and then walked back around to Hector. The man was dead, but still clutched the metal key tightly.

As Zerzera prized it from his fingers, something else caught his eye. There was a green glow coming from between the floorboards. As he reached down to collect the trapped item, he realized it was the knucklebone that had slipped off the table the night before. As he lifted it up, he realized it was showing a symbol, an unmistakable bright green outline of a ship.

A feeling of relief washed over him. The green rune – was he was going to make it after all? He hurried out of the tavern, a new confidence filling him, and ran straight into Laslo. His friend was soaked in blood, and his eyes glowed a terrible blue. Before Zerzera could react,

the big man hammered him with his shield, knocking Zerzera to the ground and flashing the long hammer-pike down. Zerzera jerked his neck to the side, avoiding the mighty strike that shattered the flagstone below it. Leaping to his feet, he narrowly dodged two more quick strikes that would have stabbed him under the arm and in the groin.

Thoughts flashed through his mind as he faced Laslo, his heart burning in pain. Would he get the chance to tell Laslo's wife that her husband was dead? Was Greymane dead too? Was it worth going back? Should he just jump off the city walls and take his chances with the fall?

Then he remembered the knucklebone and understood. Laslo hadn't rolled a blank rune – he had touched the smaller knucklebone as it fell. He had rolled the green rune. Laslo would live. Understanding flowed into Zerzera's mind. He dodged another wild swing from Laslo and lifted his shield to slam it at his friend. The sharpened top edge caught Laslo squarely in the nose, breaking it with a loud crunch. Laslo topped onto his back and Zerzera dragged him into Pasco's and threw him into the storeroom. For good measure, he threw the skeleton in too, then pulled out the scroll that Camisade had given him and pushed it into Laslo's pack.

Then he swung the door shut, locked it, and sprinted back towards the battle.

The fighting had spread into the city now, and those that could defend themselves were doing so with whatever weapons they could find. Screams of the wounded or dying echoed through the crisp morning air.

He found Greymane fighting blade for blade with Arthas in front of the great fountain. A small crowd of watchmen still stood with him, fighting at a wall of undead, and Zerzera hacked his way towards his king. The old man had lost his helm and shield, but was still parrying and thrusting defiantly, his face purple with strain and anger.

“Lord, I have the key,” Zerzera said.

“Good boy,” said Greymane through gritted teeth. “Now get down there and do it.”

He realized that Greymane was standing in front of the metal hatch. The old man stuck his jaw out and launched a final attack on Arthas, pushing to prince back and allowing Zerzera to pull the hatch open and slip inside.

The smell of gas hit him immediately, reminding him of his task as he climbed into the long chamber. Zerzera was descending into the brewery that Laslo had talked about – with enormous vats of liquid stretched into the distance, filled with a myriad of bubbling alcoholic beverages.

A line of complicated valves and wheels were mounted on the wall to his left and a loud whistling came from the panel. As he approached, he realized it was a pressure alarm. He understood now why there were the gas lanterns had not been lit last night, and why the water levels in the canals were so low. Hector and Greymane had turned every valve all the way to the left. The city was a ticking time bomb, just waiting for a trigger.

At the end of a row was a glass box that covered a metallic blue keyhole. Zerzera smashed the box, took a deep breath, and turned the key.

The explosion blossomed like a rose, sending a tidal wave of flame rolling over the city. The great fountains were, for a moment, grander than ever, before being ripped from the ground and thrown into the sky by gallons of foaming water. Flagstones were torn up as gas lines ruptured, catapulting men, monsters and buildings hundreds of feet into the air.

Gilneas would never allow their country to fall into the wrong hands.

Epilogue

Somewhere in the western ocean

The old tavern floated haphazardly on the ocean, red flames licking at the ancient wood, and boiling smoke and steam rising behind it. It had been catapulted from the city, and the Lich King's temporary grasp over Laslo Antares had been broken.

In warm smoky darkness, Laslo awoke.

"Finally, you're awake." said a rattling voice behind him.

Laslo turned to meet the glowing blue eyes of a skeleton that dimly illuminated the cramped room.

“Argh,” he said, in a deep echoing voice, then raised a hand to his face. “Ow. I think my nose is broken,” he said, his lips feeling fat and swollen.

“That’s the least of our problems,” said Pasco. “We’re locked in the storeroom of a sinking ship that was never meant to be a ship.”

“Oh,” said the death knight.

“It’s also on fire,” said Pasco.